

# Youth Group Night

*By Dennis Kelly*

It's Wednesday night, and thirty-eight junior and senior high school kids tumble down stairs into the twenty by forty-foot basement clubhouse located in the church community building on St. Paul's Superior Street. The cinder block, plaster-coated walls have been painted in flowers, handprints, sunbursts, sports logos and scripture snippets. The room is architecturally punctuated with glass block windows, exposed conduit, electrical service panels and fluorescent lights.

The smell of formaldehyde permeating from the newly donated carpet is almost gone, and the scent of kids has returned to its familiar prominence. It's the smell of youthful energy, McDonalds french fries and the pick-up touch football game before the start of the evening session. It's the smell of teenagers in full pubescent bloom and of cheap trial perfumes mixed with Sour Patch Kids eye-squinting, lip-puckering candy. It's the odor of babies compliments of the staff and sometimes the youth both fresh and poopy all at once. It's the "essence of tennis shoe," its bouquet the same by any brand name.

The mix of the kids in these small quarters is truly combustible. Recognizing the "brink of chaos" Christopher, the 29 year old, lanky, blue-jeaned, youth leader, shoulders his guitar and channels the energy into a biblical version of Louie Louie. The chorus line sung as "*Pharaoh Pharaoh, oooh baby, let my people go uh, yea, yea, yea.*" The older kids take the lead leaving no doubt that it's cooler to sing than not. They add animation to

the lyrics and make like an Egyptian hieroglyph extending their arms, pointing in opposite directions. After a few more songs, including some of Christopher's originals, he sets his guitar down and the kids scramble for a chair. There are many styles from which to choose. The genuine naughyde recliner is always a favorite; close friends clamber for the blue corduroy love seat or the three cushion Mediterranean settee. Other choices include refugee pieces that have long ago been separated from their mates like the skirted nylon frieze side chair or the Early American rocker. For sprawling comfort there are the yellow pac-man beanbags or a piece of the floor.

Once settled, a topic is offered for discussion and small groups are randomly configured. More often than not, the subject matter is only a strawman to be burnt up in the heat of vulnerability. With heads down and in low murmurs, the elements of Father Clay's "safe place" are tested. Risk-fear-trust are stirred and sampled, and sometimes the random alchemy of the night produces enough faith to allow a teenage boy or girl to free themselves of the burden of peer personality, to drop their mask and share the things that keep them up at night: the love lost, wanted or unclaimed.

Tonight, eighth grader Natalie rubs at her eyes, red from crying, revealing a boy's name written in green ink across the back of her left hand and finger nails painted purple and glittered. She offers that she had an argument with her mother after school; they are always fighting and she is continually being grounded for staying out late. She owns up to this consequence but thinks her mother, who is frequently dating, is piling it on just so she has a babysitter available for Natalie's three-year old brother. Pulling at the braided gold chain and cross around her neck, Natalie acknowledges that by being stuck at home her grades have improved this quarter. She says that she and her mother have been to a counselor, and things have been getting better. But now the worst has happened. Her

mother's boyfriend has taken a job in Columbus, Ohio, and they are going to move there with him. Living with her dad is not possible because he has a new family. A girl reaches for Natalie's hand; the group closes around her to soften her tearful plea that "I'll have no friends."

With the night drawing to a close, a circle is formed, hands are joined, and prayerful intentions are put forth. Improvement in grades and making the team are among the most frequent, followed by get well hopes for uncles and aunts who are always having surgery, home life problems, a friend of a friend situation, lost pets and restored driving privileges.

As the kids take leave, the subtle transformation of the evening is heard in the softness of the voices and footsteps leading up the stairs into the dark winter night.

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